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ABSTRACT

This study investigates cooperation in conversation among group members at five educational levels. In groups of six (three males and three females) second-, fifth-, ninth-, and twelfth-graders and college students met for 10 meetings of 20 minutes to an hour's duration. Members decided discussion topics and procedures. These meetings were tape recorded and the eighth meeting was transcribed as the source of data for each group. Each remark of a transcript was coded independently by two coders into one of five categories which served to describe how a remark was related to directly preceeding remarks on a particular topic. These categories were: unrelated; tangential; related; factual evaluation/elaboration/question; and perspective-oriented evaluation/elaboration/question. Developmental changes in conversational quality were assessed primarily by developmental trends in the proportion of remarks in each of the five categories of topic relatedness. Unrelated and tangential remarks were frequent only among second graders. Frequency of related remarks was high among elementary school students and lower among high school students. More complex remarks were frequent among ninth graders and increased in frequency among older students. Perspective-oriented statements were noticeably frequent only among twelfth graders and college students. Results are taken as evidence that the conversational quality achieved within small groups changes markedly across the public school age span. (Author/RH)

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The Development of Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

Conversation is a ubiquitous feature of human social interaction and presumably a major channel of interpersonal communication. Yet, there have been few studies that attempt to describe the general features of conversation and fewer still that attempt to describe developmental changes in conversation (Hartup, 1970; Shantz, 1975). Among clinically-oriented researchers, there is a long tradition of investigating social interaction. Bales' (1950) studies of group problem-solving are classic examples of such research, the purpose of which is to illuminate clinically-relevant aspects of conversation. Developmental psycholinquists have become increasingly interested in describing the development of language pragmatics (e.g. Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977). Such work, however, has typically focused on the fine-grained description of particular speech events rather than on the description of the general features of conversation (e.g. Garvey, 1977). Researchers within the cognitive developmental tradition, too, have been concerned with conversation. Piaget (1926) suggested three avenues for investigating conversation in his early work: (1) categorizing children's remarks in free play as egocentric or socialized (2) studing the development of role-taking by means of referential communications tasks and (3) describing developmental changes in the general cooperative arrangements that were presumed to underly conversation. Piaget's conception of egocentric speech and his conceptualization and experimental approach to studying role-taking have received considerable attention (McCarthy, 1936; Glucksberg, Krauss & Higgins, 1975). However, his conceptualization of the development of conversation has received little attention.

It is Piaget's view of conversation that provides the impetus for the present study. He viewed conversation as the result of cooperation among the participants and proposed that the nature of such cooperation changes with age which, in turn, produces corresponding changes in the general manner in which the participants

talk with one another. The purpose of the present study was to describe how such cooperation might be displayed in conversation. The management of topics of conversation as determined by the topical relations existing between adjacent remarks seemed, on the basis of preliminary observations, to be an appropriate arena for this purpose. To determine the utility of this idea and ultimately, to reflect on Piaget's view of the development of conversation in particular, his notion of cooperation, developmental changes were assessed with respect to the management of topics of conversation as displayed in the topic relations existing between adjacant remarks.

METHODS

The conversation generated within small discussion groups (4-6 persons) was selected for study. Three males and three females were randomly selected from the same classroom in a homogeneously working class southern city (Durham, N.C.) to compose each of the 5 groups at the 5 grade levels studied--second grade, fifth grade, ninth grade, twelvth grade and late college. Grade levels were selected on the basis of pretesting to reflect what were felt to be major developmental changes in conversational quality. Each group met for 10 meetings, twice a week, and meetings lasted for from 20 minutes to an hour depending upon the attention span of the group members. The groups met in a separate room and an adult leader was present. The leader's role was that of an interested observer who intervened only when necessary. The members decided what to talk about and how to conduct discussion. Each meeting was tape recorded and the eighth meeting was transcribed as the source of data for each group.

Each remark of a transcript was coded independently by two coders into one of the following five categories that describes how a remark was related to directly preceeding remarks in subject matter: unrelated, tangential, related, factual evaluation/elaboration/question, perspective-oriented evaluation/elaboration/question.

A sample of the conversation of each grade level is presented in Table 1 including illustrations of each of these five categories.

RESULTS

Conversational quality, therefore, was assessed by the kinds of topical relations existing between adjacent remarks in a conversation. Developmental changes in conversational quality were assessed primarily by developmental trends in the proportion of remarks in each of the five categories of topic relatedness. Those results are reported here along with summaries of subsidiary analyses to specify the consequences of developmental changes in the proportion of different kinds of topic relations for the development of topic management.

Unrelated and tangential remarks occured with appreciable frequency only at the youngest grade level studied here, second grade. (See Figure 1, panel A) Analyses of conversation length indicated that the high proportion of such remarks reflected the tendency of second graders to change topics often and abruptly. Second graders had a much greater proportion of remarks (60%) that occured in brief discussions - 10 remarks or less--than did the older grade levels (18.7-9.5%), which was statistically reliable: $F(4,20)=15.75$ $p < .01$.

Related remarks increased in frequency during the elementary school years and then decreased in frequency as more complex topic relations came to the fore in high school. (See Figure 1, panel B) Further, the more frequently occuring types of related remarks--and some kinds of tangential remarks--tended to form repetitive sequences as judged by Sackett's lag sequential technique (Sackett, 1978), using the conservative criterion of $p < .01$ two tailed. So, second graders' and, especially, fifth graders' conversation was distinguished from that of the older grade levels by a particular type of conversational organization. (See Table 1, sample B for an instance of a repetitive sequence of listing remarks.)

More complex remarks--factual and perspective-oriented evaluations/elaborations/

Table 1

Samples of Conversation from the Five Grade Levels Studied

A. 2nd graders' conversation

1 We, we have paper plates--with turkey on it and lots of (unintelligible). You know...

2 I don't know what you're talkin' about.

3 Know what? My uncle killed a turkey. [tangential remark]

4 Not frying pan? (to #3)

5 No.

6 Bring your lunch today? [unrelated remark]

7 Thanksgiving we go to grandma's and...

8 I seen a big frying pan at Hulen's store [tangential remark]

B. 5th graders' conversation

1 Be quiet! O.K. start off Billy. What if you was the teacher?

2 O.K. if I was the teacher I'd give us less work and more time to play and I'd be mean to y'all too.

3 O.K. Ann (meaning that it's her turn)

4 If I was the teacher I'd do work--um, sit around and watch tv. I wouldn't assign no papers--um... [related remark]

5 I'd let y'all watch tv stories. [related remark]

6 I'd turn the tv on channel 4 at 9:30 and watch "Popeye". [related remark]

7 Play basketball--paly basketball from 8:30 to 12. Then have lunch and go right back and play some more. [related remark]

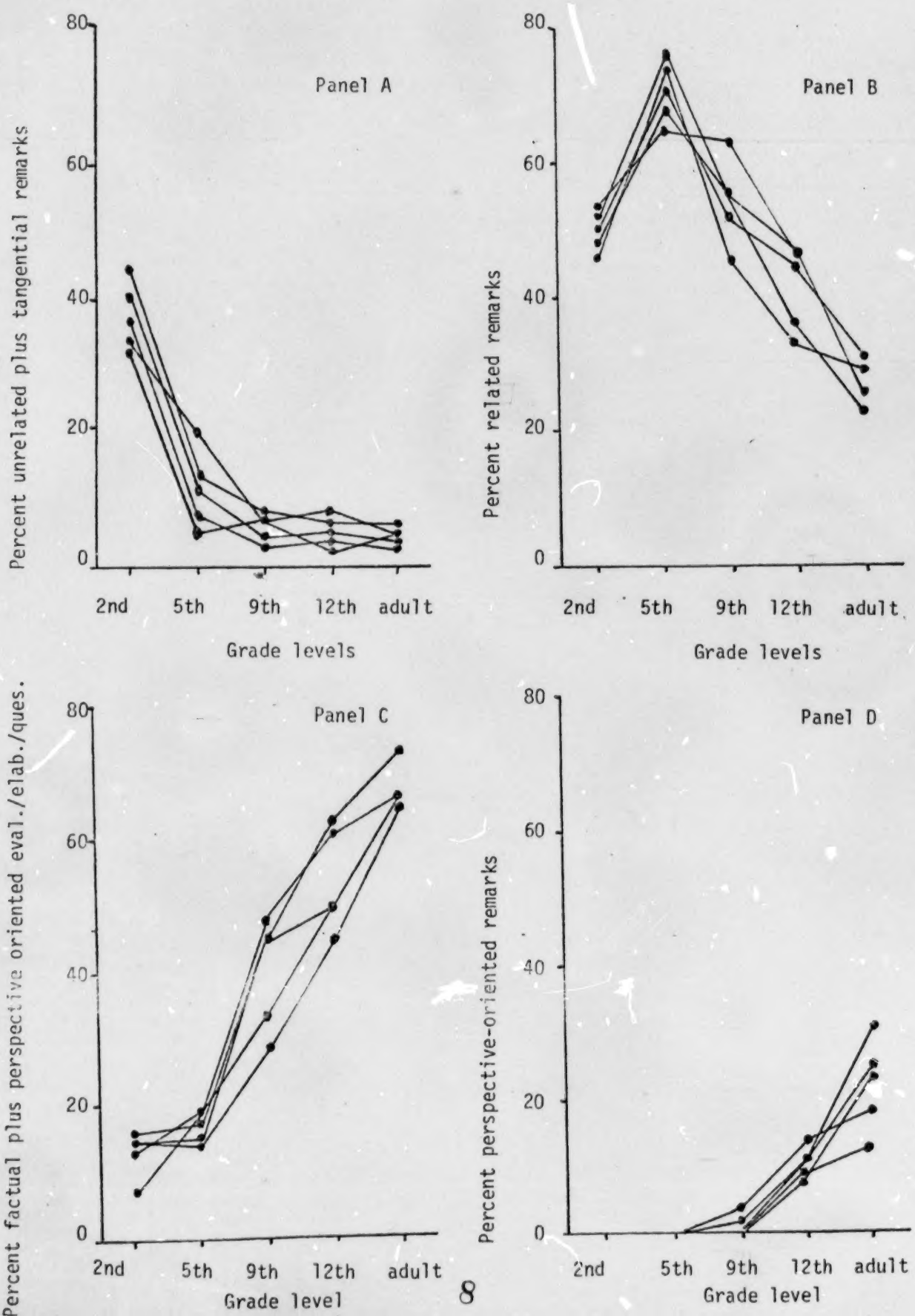
C. 9th graders' conversation

1 Where'd you streak from? Up, up, you ran up to the stop sign?

Table 1 (continued)

2	No. I ran up to the corner of Clinton and...	[factual elaborati
3	That was cool, Bud!	[factual evaluatio
4	You live near there?	[factual question]
5	Yeah. I live just down the street.	[factual elaborati
D.	12th graders' conversation	
1	(laughs) Der Doctor.	
2	What? She didn't believe the sign.(that the group was using the room) Why Ray, you don't like the good doctor?	[perspective-orien question]
3	I think she'd be a good college teacher. I don't think her temperment is suited to high school teaching. She's too bitchy.	[perspective-orien evaluation]
4	She has too short a temper, little patience.	[perspective-orien elaboration]
E.	adults' conversation	
1	What are you doing your paper on?	
2	I--got--a small personal problem. Um--simply, you study--um--after you study, you don't have anything to do. Especially this summer	[unrelated remark]
3	You miss somebody?	[perspective-orien question]
4	Well--um--that's part of it. Ronnie's back in New York. I'm alone here.	[perspective-orien elaboration]
5	You trust him back there or do you—um—just miss him?	[perspective-orien question]
6	I'm--well, I'm lonely more than anything.	[perspective-orien evaluation]

Figure 1. Developmental Trends in the Categories of Topic Relatedness.



questions--first became a sizeable proportion of remarks in the conversation of ninth graders and increased steadily in frequency thereafter. (See Figure 1, panel C) Neither particular kinds of factual evaluations/elaborations/questions nor the category as a whole typically formed repetitive sequences. However, ninth graders' conversation had a high proportion of evaluations relative to elaborations and that proportion declined thereafter ($F(2,12)=15.9$, $p < .01$). The prominence of evaluations gave ninth graders' conversation its distinctive flavor.

Evaluations, elaborations and questions that focus on person's perspectives or feelings were less frequent than those that focused on factual matters, appearing with noticeable frequency only in late high school and adulthood. (See Figure 1, panel D) Though particular kinds of perspective-oriented remarks did not tend to form repetitive sequences, they did typically cluster as an entire category--and strongly. Using the lag sequential technique, 8 of 10 groups displayed clustering of perspective-oriented remarks as a whole and usually at more than one lag. Such clustering occured in discussions that were appropriate for more personal disclosure--controversial political or social topics, particular members' concerns or the concerns of someone known to all group members. Further inspection of such discussions revealed that twelvth graders did not sustain perspective-oriented discussions whereas adult groups did.

DISCUSSION

These results are taken as evidence that the conversational quality achieved within small groups--specifically coordination associated with topic management--changes markedly across the public school age-span. The robustness of the findings, as indicated by the grade level differences in Figure 1, make it likely that these findings will generalize to other settings. Thus, the results are seen as supporting Piaget's conceptualization of the development of conversation. The results, though, suggest that what Piaget called "collaboration in abstract thought"--by which he

seems to have meant factual, philosophical discussions--is not the most developmentally advanced form of conversation. Rather, perspective-oriented conversation seems to be, though undoubtedly the conduct of both factual and perspective-oriented discussions undergo refinement well into adulthood. Also, Piaget's use of the term cooperation implies intentionality. Though the method of the present study was not suited to a thorough investigation of the issue of conversationalists' intentions relative to the talking itself, the observations that were gathered cast doubt on Piaget's way of viewing cooperation in conversing. Such cooperation seemed to be largely unnoticed by the participants. To put it another way, the observed coordination in topic management seemed to be part of the background events of conversation. Certainly, the issue of the relation of such coordination to the participants' cognitious deserves further attention.

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